

**Testimony of
Laura Bush
before The
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions
January 24, 2002**

Senator Kennedy, Senator Gregg and members of the Committee, on September 11, 2001, I came here to meet with you to discuss the development and education of our young children. That meeting was called off because of the tragedies that struck the innocent victims at the World Trade Towers, the Pentagon and on flight 93.

September 11 was a turning point for all of us -as parents, as neighbors, as Americans. I will never forget the moments that Senator Kennedy and Senator Gregg and I shared privately before we met the media in this very room. And, I will always remember that you were not concerned for yourselves, but rather you were concerned for others -my husband, the people of our country, and, the victims of the attacks and their families.

Yet, when we came in here to make our public statements, you were resolute in announcing that this briefing was being *postponed*, not *cancelled*. In the face of tragedy, you remained focused on the children of America. For that I applaud you and the members of this august Committee.

Since September 11, I have traveled across the country meeting children and their parents. I have seen the faces of children who were directly affected by the attacks -children who lost parents in the Pennsylvania crash; children who were displaced from their schools in New York; students who lost classmates in the airplane that struck the Pentagon.

As a result, I am doubly committed to using my voice to help give our youngest Americans a real chance to succeed in the classroom, in the university lecture hall, and in the work place. I am proud to be your partner in this effort to make sure that children's learning skills are nurtured during the critical years between the crib and the classroom.

When President Bush was sworn into office one year ago, he vowed to make educating every child his top domestic priority. He committed to work to close the achievement gap among students.

Thanks to the leadership of Senator Kennedy, Senator Gregg and all the members of this Committee, on January 8, President Bush signed into law the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* - an historic piece of legislation that sets high standards and holds schools accountable for student results.

This comprehensive plan will improve overall student performance *and* help close the achievement gap that exists in our nation's schools.

In 2002, programs in the elementary and secondary reform bill received a 27 percent increase in funding, including an 18 percent increase in Title 1, and a boost to nearly \$1 billion for early reading programs.

Soon, my husband will propose a budget that even further funds critical education programs. His proposal will include major increases for education and special education - including an increase of \$1 billion in funding for Title 1 programs for disadvantaged students.

The President's new budget will also ask for \$1 billion in additional funding to help children with special needs.

Thanks to the reforms included in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, we can be sure that taxpayer dollars are spent wisely.

I am proud to be part of President Bush's effort to improve the quality of education for all children.

Last February, I launched an initiative called Ready to Read, Ready to Learn. This initiative has two major goals -first, to ensure that all young children are ready to read and learn when they enter their first classroom -and second, to help our nation recruit the best and the brightest to become teachers, especially in classrooms in our most impoverished neighborhoods. I am dedicated to ensuring that all young children are ready to read and learn upon school entry.

My emphasis on making sure that preschool children are provided stimulating activities and interactions with adults and other children so they can develop strong language and pre- reading concepts from birth onward stems from my own experiences as a mother, a public school teacher and a school librarian.

As a mother, I learned quickly that reading to our daughters and playing language games --even when they were babies --brought joy and laughter to our home. As they grew physically, they also grew in their love of being read to and then reading themselves.

My husband and I must have read "Hop on Pop" to them dozens of times, and it was not uncommon for them to ask me to read the same book several times a day. It was astonishing to watch how many new words they learned as we read and talked about words and their meanings, the names of the letters, and the sounds the letters make.

Before I knew it, they could "read" many words in "Hop on Pop" and other books. Well, actually they *memorized* the words because we read them so often. But the important thing is they thought they were reading. Even by two years of age they knew when the book was right side up and knew that we always started to read on the left side of the page.

As they continued to grow, they became fascinated with different ways we could play with words and sounds, and delighted in hearing nursery rhymes, stories, and songs. Before they entered kindergarten they knew that the letters and words in books talked to you just like people do.

When our girls entered school they were well on their way to independent reading and their love for reading was firmly established. Little did I know at that time how all of our reading activities from their birth onward provided the foundation for their later reading skills.

During my career as an elementary school teacher, I was fortunate to focus a great deal of my time on a love of mine --interacting with young children around books and reading. In fact, story time was my favorite time of the day, and I was constantly thrilled at how reading opened up new worlds for the children and sparked their imaginations.

However, this was also a time when I observed that some children were having difficulty learning to read. It was troubling to watch these little ones struggle with print, but it was even more troubling to see how embarrassed and frustrated they were by their failure to do what they saw other children do. It was as if their self-esteem and confidence took a blow every time they tried to read.

For many of these children, I could see that they didn't feel comfortable in school-- it was not a place that they wanted to be, and I noticed that they began to avoid reading. Later, as a librarian, I also noticed that some teachers held lower expectations for these children even though many were very bright and quite adept in other skills.

Many of these children were having difficulties learning to read because they had not developed the basic building blocks of language during their preschool years --the building blocks that are forged through language play, lap-time reading, bedtime stories and the conversations about the characters and the situations that the stories brought to life.

Why was this basic foundation missing? In some cases, the children's parents had not learned to read themselves and could not read to their children. In some cases, limited income meant no books in the home. In some cases, parents' work schedules simply precluded any routine conversation, language play, or interactions with books if they were available.

In yet other cases, parents and caregivers simply did not know the importance of reading to and engaging their children in word play. As a result, their children were less exposed to language. Some children may have had learning problems, making learning to read difficult.

In short, I saw firsthand that many children simply did not have the early opportunities that help to develop a love for language and reading. And I learned that not having those opportunities can have devastating effects on children's success in school. I realized that, for many children, being left behind did not begin in elementary school --it began in the years between diapers and backpacks.

I also realized that something had to be done. There simply is no excuse for any of our youngest and most vulnerable children to be forced to climb uphill just as they enter school. It is a tough enough transition as is. No matter what their circumstances of birth, we have to strive to level the playing field for those youngsters born into conditions that limit opportunities to develop and learn.

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Over the years, I have been blessed to be surrounded by people who are passionate about education. My parents nurtured my love of reading before I started school; Mrs. Gnagy, my 2nd grade teacher, inspired me to become a teacher; my in-laws, who, even in retirement, promote strong schools and literacy programs; and, of course, my husband who shares our fellow Texan Phyllis Hunter's philosophy that reading is the new civil right.

Last July, I convened a White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development at Georgetown University. Many experts and practitioners came together to help us understand how to help all of our children become ready to read and ready to learn.

I am delighted that Senator Kennedy participated in the Summit, and inspired us with his dedication to this issue.

My specific purpose in convening the summit was to develop a clear understanding of what parents, grandparents, early childhood teachers, childcare providers, and other caregivers can systematically do to provide children with rich and rewarding early experiences during a period of development that is marked by extraordinary growth and change.

I asked the participants to focus on early cognitive development with an emphasis on the development of early language and pre-reading abilities. I wanted to make sure that all of us understood how these skills, or their absence, affect a child's later ability to read and thus succeed in school.

While my focus is on early language and pre-reading development, I do not want to minimize the importance of nutrition and physical development or the development of feelings, behavior, and social skills. To address early cognitive development, including language and literacy development, outside of the context of social and emotional development, would limit the progress that we can make. All of these competencies are intertwined and each requires focused attention.

But, the development of early language and pre-reading skills is not only extraordinarily critical to a child's reading ability and academic success throughout school, as well as his or her occupational success throughout life, the absence of this development has the potential to destroy self-esteem, confidence, and motivation to learn.

The teaching of vocabulary concepts and other language skills and pre-reading skill to include print concepts, letter knowledge and phonological concepts in preschool programs has not been emphasized enough in the past and has not received the critical attention it needs.

Why? Many early childhood educators and parents have thought that early learning was primarily maturational and that preschool children "were not developmentally ready" to learn about letters, sounds, writing, numbers, vocabulary concepts or other sophisticated content.

Conventional wisdom has been that it is best to wait to encourage young children to read, count, and learn abstract concepts because they will get enough of that in school. The idea has been that teaching this type of content too early may interfere with the motivation to learn once children arrive at school.

But we have learned that this is not the case. The infant brain actually seeks out and acquires a tremendous amount of information about language in the first year of life.

Even before babies can speak, they have already figured out many of the components of language. They know which particular sounds their language uses, what sounds can be combined to create words, and the tempo and rhythm of words and phrases.

Why is this information important? Because developmental science has taught us that there is a strong connection between early language development and reading. Language and reading require the same types of sound analysis. The better babies are at distinguishing the building blocks of speech at six months, the better they will be at other more complex language skills at two and three years of age, and the easier it will be for them at four and five years old to grasp the idea of how sounds link to letters.

Preschool cognitive abilities, including language and pre-reading abilities, can predict school success and school completion. For example, reading scores in the 9th grade can be predicted with surprising accuracy from a child's knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten.

Children need help learning these concepts --they do not develop naturally. A child will not learn the name of the letter "A", the sound an "A" makes or how to print it simply by being with adults who know these things, or by being with adults who read a great deal for pleasure. Children learn these critical concepts because adults take the time and effort to teach them in an exciting, engaging, and interactive manner.

This does not mean that preschool children should be taught using the same methods and materials that are used with first and second graders. The challenge for the parent, the grandparent, the preschool teacher, or the childcare provider is to develop fun, educational language activities that also engage and develop children's interests, social competencies, and emotional health. All of these goals can be joined and met, but there must be a clear and equal emphasis on building cognitive skills.

Every expert who participated in the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development stressed that reading is the keystone for academic and life success. A failure to learn to read not only leads to failure in school, but portends failure throughout life.

Not only are children humiliated emotionally and socially in school because of this failure, they are unable to learn about the wonders of science, mathematics, literature and other subjects because they cannot read grade-level texts. By high school, the student who cannot read has almost no dream of attending college and can only look forward to meager occupational choices.

It is no wonder that 10 to 15 percent of poor readers drop out of school. And with their limited options, they are more than twice as likely as successful students to be unemployed after dropping out, to be arrested or to engage in substance abuse.

Reading failure pushes beyond school failure and occupational hardships. Without sufficient reading skills, a person cannot read a prescription, decipher a warning label, or keep up with news.

Reading failure does not just constitute an educational issue --it reflects a significant public health problem. And, with great anguish we note that parents who cannot read cannot engage their children in reading activities.

During our Summit, we learned that there are effective early language and cognitive development strategies that can be used at home and in preschool that can ensure that many children at risk of failure now can enter their first classroom ready to read and ready to learn.

We can begin to disseminate and implement the principles applied in these strategies as quickly as possible through our colleges and universities, professional organizations, libraries, and research programs.

The best scientific knowledge of "what works" is only effective when it is provided in an informed manner. The early childhood field needs better curriculum that does a better job of helping young children with their pre-reading and language skills.

President Bush has asked Secretary Rod Paige and Secretary Tommy Thompson to convene a task force on early childhood development to identify priorities for research to address these critical issues.

A team of scientists and educators from the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services is moving forward with plans to produce materials that will help parents, preschools and child care programs know more about enhancing cognitive development. They will also identify and conduct the research necessary to close critical knowledge gaps. Secretaries Paige and Thompson will share their findings with all of you as well.

In closing, I want to thank you for the opportunity to discuss these important issues with you today. They are national issues that affect the heart and soul of our people.

Education has always been important to our nation, but since September 11th we appreciate its importance even more because we want America to always be the land of opportunity and to have the kind of internal strength that comes from every child and every citizen having a great education.

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From day one, the education we provide our children will shape the way they think and learn. The quality of their education will either drive or stifle the enthusiasm, motivation, and effort they bring to learning, the way they interact with others, and their ability to adapt to their successes and failures throughout life.

We are embarking on a most noble mission to help their journey become as fulfilling and productive as possible. This is their birthright.

I appreciate your inviting me here today, Senator Kennedy. I commend your efforts and those of Senator Gregg and all of the Committee members to ensure that all our children have a strong language and pre-reading foundation before they board their first school bus. I look forward to our work on behalf of America's youngest children. Together, we will ensure that no child is left behind.

Thank you.

